DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 683 JC 840 275

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TITLE Has the Time Come? A Formative Assessment Model for Honors Programs in Two-Year Colleges.
PUB DATE 2 Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (64th, Washington, DC, April 1-4, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academically Gifted; College Planning; *Community Colleges; *Curriculum Development; Educational Trends; *Formative Evaluation; *Honors Curriculum; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Honors programs are a viable part of the community college response to the challenges of the late 1980's. The growth in the two-year college memberships in Phi Theta Kappa and the National Collegiate Honors Council suggests that greater attention is being given to the academically able students at the two-year college. A rationale for developing honors programs includes the following elements: the increased numbers of academically able students attending two-year colleges for financial reasons; a renewed commitment to excellence in community colleges; the potential for professional development and faculty revitalization; and increasing competition among postsecondary institutions for enrollments. Honors programs offer benefits for students through smaller classes, increased opportunity for individualized study, recognition of their achievements, and increased acceptance by transfer institutions. Faculty benefit as well in that honors classes offer a more stimulating environment and improved opportunities for personal renewal. The colleges themselves also benefit from an enhanced image and the generation of new ideas and practices in honors programs that are applicable across the curriculum. Existing honors programs share the characteristics of specified admissions criteria, financial support for the students, special course sections and creative program designs, and an extra-course aspect. Five questions which probe the nature and extent of institutional commitment are provided to assist colleges in determining their readiness to initiate honors programs. (HB)

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HAS THE TIME COME?

A Formative Assessment Model for Honors Programs in Two-Year Colleges

Forum #24

Serving Academically Talented Students:
Opportunity or Obstacle?

64th Annual Convention
American Association of Community
and Junior Colleges

Washington, DC

April 2, 1984

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Introduction

In his classic fable, Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll captures the essence of a dilemma facing community colleges as we reach the mid-point of the 1980's. Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The cat responds, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,..."[1]

With declining numbers of high school graduates projected through the early 1990's, American community colleges are being forced to re-examine traditional priorities. State universities and private colleges are no longer beset with unmanageable numbers of people seeking admission. Yet, in a depressed economy, some of those most able to participate in collegiate education cannot afford the four-year, residential college. The community college is competing with the four-year institutions for high school graduates while providing challenging, attractive programs for intellectually able but financially restricted students. Vaughn suggests that "...community colleges are failing to come up with definitive answers. Indeed, the community college is facing a crisis of identity...."[2]

In deciding what the nature of the community college mission should be for the late 1980's, the concept of honors programs is experiencing a renaissance. The purpose of this essay is to assess whether honors programs are a viable part of the community college response to the challenges of the late 1980's and to provide a framework for evaluating their composition and delivery.

The Honors Program Renaissance

While no current comprehensive survey indicates the number of community colleges with honors programs, there are empirical indicators of a renaissance. Phi Theta Kappa, the national honor society for two-year colleges, reports a 40% increase in institutional memberships in the last decade.[3] Further, the

number of two-year colleges holding membership in the National Collegiate Honors Council is on the increase.[4]

This growth suggests that greater attention is being given to the academically able student at the two-year college. The question facing many institutions is should they include such programs in their repertoire of response to the challenges of the late 1980's; are they worth the resources? A review of the current literature describing honors programs produces a rationale for such programs.

Program Rationale

The initial element in a rationale for honors programs has been described as "academic spread."[5] Two-year colleges traditionally have concentrated their efforts in meeting the needs of a widely varied clientele. With a depressed economy and a concomitant decline in federal financial aid, the number of academically able students in attendance is increasing. These individuals have yet to be served.

The second element is a renewed commitment to excellence. In response to declining national aptitude test scores and the challenge inherent in A Nation at Risk, Vaughn describes a "quality revolution" which is motivating two-year colleges to strengthen programs in ways "that are compatible with the college's mission."[6]

The third element involves professional development. The faculty and staff in the two-year college of 1984 are in their mid-forties and average fifteen years of service.[7] Enrollment plateauing, high interest rates, and soaring housing costs limit job mobility. Therefore, they are in need of new challenges to revitalize their sense of purpose. Honors programs serving able, motivated students can be a source of renewal.

The final element assists two-year colleges in competing with other segments of higher education for the declining number of high school graduates. Honors programs enhance the image of the institution in its service area. The college can emerge as a place where academic achievement is encouraged and rewarded. When this element is coupled with low cost and ease of access, a strategic advantage emerges.

The preceding four element rationale suggests that honors programs may have a place in today's two-year college. Are there specific benefits which accrue to students, faculty, and institutions from participation in such programs?

Program Benefits

In the summer of 1982, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges at UCLA conducted a limited national survey of two-year colleges offering honors programs.[8] Analysis of the results reveals the benefits obtained by students, faculty, and the institution from program participation.

Students benefit in four ways. The first is class size. The colleges surveyed report that honors courses have lower enrollments than regular ones. Also, these classes are homogeneously grouped, containing only academically able students. The second is the opportunity for individualized study. All respondents indicate that some type of independent study or project is available. Third, participating students receive recognition for their achievements on transcripts, at graduation, and in the community. Finally, completion of honors programs assists students with acceptance by top transfer institutions. Several of the survey participants report articulation agreements which provide preferential treatment for program graduates. Participation, from the student point of view, has much to recommend it.

What do faculty gain? Survey results group the benefits into three categories. First, honors courses have smaller enrollments and faculty teaching them are reported, generally, to have lighter loads. The reduction is found either in number of sections taught or in the number of students advised. Second, the most important incentive for participation as indicated by faculty is the opportunity to work with highly motivated, able students. These individuals enrich and stimulate the learning environment. Finally, faculty teaching in honors programs work with their discipline in innovative, challenging ways. From the faculty perspective, honors programs are an opportunity for personal renewal.

What benefits accrue to the college from implementing honors programs? Survey results indicate two broad categories. First, honors programs enhance the image of the institution. Such activities present the college as a place that fosters academic excellence. As a result, the institution is able to recruit more effectively among the able students in its service area. Second, honors programs function as a catalyst in the process of generating new, stimulating ideas and practices that are applicable across the college curriculum. The result of an effective honors program is an educational environment rich in stimulation for all, participants or not.

The Center survey would suggest that honors programs provide something for all. Is there a general structure used by honors programs?

Program Structure

In the fall of 1983, three organizations--the National Collegiate Honors Council, the National Council of Instructional Administrators, and the Community College Humanities Association--published a handbook for honors programs in

the two-year college. The purpose of the publication is to provide an overview of and describe structures for programs.[9] Included are a number of sample designs. An analysis of them produces a conceptual framework useful to those considering initiating honors.

The first element of the honors program is the admission criteria. Typically, three components are examined: test scores, using either the SAT or ACT; high school grade point average; and recommendations from teachers. In special cases, interviews with members of the institution's honors committee may be required. Specific standards vary across institutions; however, in most instances applicants must meet at least two of the specified criteria to be admitted. Following admission, participants are usually required to maintain a specific grade point average, complete a specified number of honors courses, and participate in some extracurricular enrichment activities to remain in the program.

Participating institutions report that financial support is usually provided for honors program students. Whether it is in the form of fee waivers, institutional grants, foundation scholarships, or merit awards varies from college to college. This second element serves as a recruitment device and tangible recognition for student achievement.

Element three is the course design which structures the program. In general, most programs offer special honors sections of general education, specialty or occupational program courses. This element offers the greatest room for creativity. Several colleges indicate that they use interdisciplinary courses to provide program synthesis. Others report that end-of-program seminars allow participants to integrate program components. Finally, the honors contract, honors colloquia, or honors forum are vehicles which can be

used to provide the unique program character desired by faculty and participants. The common theme emerging from all designs is that form will follow the function desired by those designing the program.

The honors handbook and the Center survey concur that an extra-course aspect is found in nearly all programs. Element four may include independent study, a mentor system, honors receptions, or community service activity. The purpose of these activities is to develop a sense of identity with the program among participants and faculty as well as to encourage honor students to apply their ability in the world outside the college.

The structure a participating college selects depends upon the perceptual set of those designing the program. Of greater importance is the commitment made to the design by the faculty and administration of the institution. Unless the program is given the opportunity to become part of the fabric of the college, success is unlikely.

A Formative Assessment Design

Since 1980, seven major publications have examined the importance of honors programs to the mission of the two-year college. An analysis of their content produces a formative assessment design which can be used to determine a college's readiness to initiate honors. The design takes the form of five questions which probe the nature and extent of institutional commitment.

1. Is the college committed to providing an honors opportunity for its clients?

   The rationale for an honors program, while persuasive, does not engender support among all college constituencies. Careful assessment is needed to determine the extent of agreement existing among faculty, counselors,

administrators, students, and the community. Any one of these groups can seriously retard program development through limited commitment.

2. Will the faculty make the necessary effort to allow the program to work? While there are professional and personal rewards for faculty in an honors program, the effort required is extensive. Unless the burden is shared by all and support is genuine among all, faculty can jeopardize program success. Those charged with designing the program are advised to involve as many faculty as possible to promote psychological ownership of the program.

3. Can the college afford to allocate sufficient resources to allow the program to succeed?

   Enthusiasm and commitment are not enough to insure success. Reduced teaching or advisement loads, limited enrollment sections, independent study, community internships, and recognition activities all demand resources in a time of serious budget limitations. Boards and presidents, along with deans and division heads, must be committed to the creative allocation of scarce resources if an honors program is to succeed. The potential exists; careful planning and commitment will produce results.

4. Are adequate financial aid funds available to recognize student achievement? In the competition for able students, tangible recognition of their achievement is essential. Two-year colleges, in the past, have not developed sources of financial aid to be dispensed on the basis of merit. In the last five years, two-year college foundations have emerged as vehicles to remediate this deficiency. Honors programs will require support from community sources, faculty and administrators, and boards if discretionary funds are to become available. A continuing source of funds is an essential first step toward program success.

5. Will the community support the college in its commitment to excellence through honors programs?

The need for community support extends beyond financial resources. Successful programs indicate that community advisory committees play an essential role in recruitment, development of independent study opportunities, design of recognition activities, and communication or program purpose to the citizenry at large. Careful design of community support mechanisms is a precondition for program development.

A common theme underlies the assessment design. It is commitment. If it exists among the various constituencies which comprise the college, then an honors program can succeed. Has the time for honors programs arrived?

Conclusion: Toward Access and Excellence

Two-year colleges in the 1970's were characterized by their ability to expand access to higher education for all desiring the opportunity. The need for access has not disappeared, however, the nature of the task has grown more complex. McCabe and Skidmore, in an essay detailing new concepts for community colleges, propose that "The 1980s are characterized by greater and greater emphasis on personal drive and personal achievement....In order to meet the important needs of our society,...there must be a shift from concern with program completion to an emphasis on high achievement and maintenance of standards. The goal should be excellence for everyone."[10]

The challenge has become one of maintaining access while affirming excellence. The creative allocation of time, expertise, resources, and effort can meet the challenge. Honors programs have a role to play. To end where we began, Carroll's Red Queen states the case: "An interesting sort of country...it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.

"If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"[11]

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